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Quentin Faulkner

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, qfaulkner1@unl.edu

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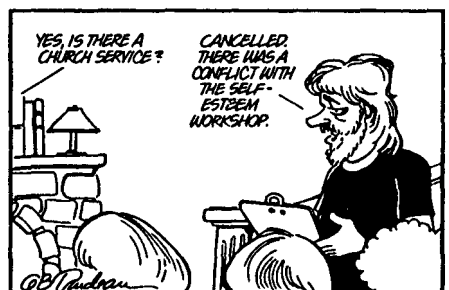
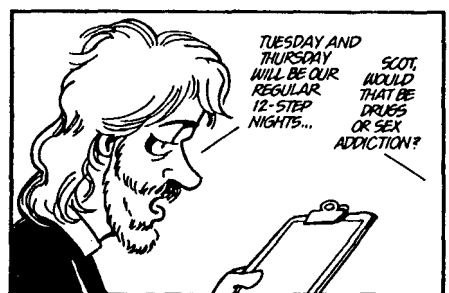
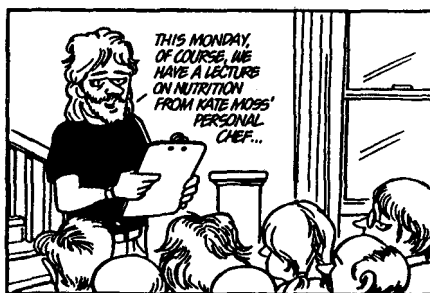
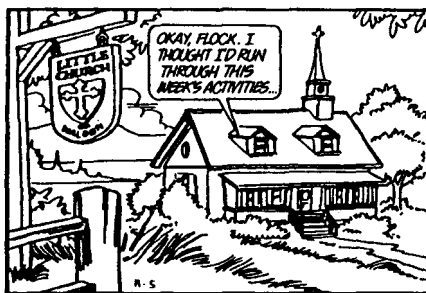
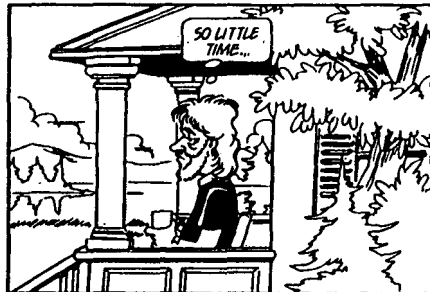
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GOTHIC PILLARS AND BLUE NOTES: ART AS A REFLECTION OF THE CONFLICT OF RELIGIONS

PART II

Quentin Faulkner, AAGO



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Part I of this article appeared in the March issue.

The existence of an intense and vital artistic activity is the most unmistakable indicator of the new religion, but it is not the only one. Three of the most commonly identified manifestations of religion are cult (public worship), myth (salvation history, doctrine), and ethics (right behavior, morals). Secular culture exhibits each of these aspects of religion.

Cult is in some measure synonymous with public worship. (The modern English-language use of the term “cult” is a distortion that wholly obscures its original meaning.) The difference between the two is one of degree rather than kind. Cult in its fullest sense is not indifferent, take-it-or-leave-it matter (as public worship today has largely be-

come); rather, it is belonging versus rejection, increase versus decline, life versus death. Cult is corporate public worship invested with ultimate significance. It is a matter of passion, of intense conviction; believers stake their very being, their continued existence, on it. From the standpoint of religion, the purpose of cult is, of course, the praise and adoration that believers sense they owe god(s). From the human standpoint, however, people have been impelled to take part in cult because through it they experience “salvation”: they are provided with wholeness, security, identity. From the human standpoint, modern entertainment and sports events have come to assume a role much akin to a cult: in their powerful attraction, in their ability to elevate mood and produce a sense of well-being, in the sense of belonging and identity they

promote (“I’m a fan of _____!”). The phrase “sports idol” is no empty one. Rock music concerts have in fact proved capable of inducing ecstatic states among those present, one of the most infallible signs of the presence of religion. However, the primary medium of the secular cult—television—suggests one essential difference between traditional religious cults and the cult of secular religion: traditional cultic events are normally communal and interactive, while the secular cult is essentially individual and passively receptive. The “blessings” of the secular cult are transmitted from cult figures to a single individual, who communes with them in solitary isolation. Even when more than one person is “communing,” each is a monad, communicating individually with the source of power and well-being.

From the human standpoint, myth is a means of expressing through art (traditionally, story-telling) the most important shared beliefs and convictions of a people. In the dissemination of the secular myth, television, films, and mass advertising have assumed the role of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. The mass media may be “ungodly,” but they are most assuredly not irreligious. They are in fact powerfully religious, and they wield their religious “punch” energetically as “preachers” of the secular myth. The most credible testimony to their effectiveness is the decline in intensity that traditional religions experience wherever the mass media have gained a wide following.

The primary secular myth the media promote, embroidered in manifold ways, is that of human centrality and self-sufficiency. The various advertisements that plug the theme “You’re worth it” or “You owe it to yourself” are so obvious they bear no elaborating. There are, however, far more subtle (and consequently more influential) examples. Consider the enormously popular TV series, *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—a program that tells us nothing about new or alien cultures, but everything about modern earth culture. Not to point an accusing finger at *Star Trek*—it is surely one of the most wholesome programs TV offers; it might even be regarded as virtuous (one of the few shows that can legitimately claim that label). *Star Trek* is particularly instructive, though, since it flirts from time to time with matters that are recognizably religious. What is the “theology” of *Star Trek*? Though it seems quite acceptable for other races to be religious, in *Star Trek* religious conviction is inappropriate for humans. Klingons (a more “primitive,” elemental, emotionally volatile people) are religious; Vulcans (the embodiment of “New-Age”) are religious (in a vaguely mystical, “Oriental” way). Humans, on the other hand, shun religion like the plague. Indeed, one episode centers on the attempt to avoid becoming “gods” for a more primitive race on another planet, and one of the crew vehemently rejects the notion of rekindling that race’s dormant belief in the supernatural. Humans are depicted as a progressive, ever-improving race that can solve its problems on its own; one of the crew tells Mark Twain (visiting the Enterprise from the 19th century): “We did away with poverty a long time ago.” The program becomes especially transparent to the secular myth when it deals with death. Services marking the passing of a comrade consist predominantly of a rehearsal of that person’s worthy or endearing human qualities, as part of a celebration honoring the person’s life—all without refer-

ence to any traditionally religious dimension. In one striking instance, at the burial of a relative, a bereaved crew member finishes delivering the eulogy (limited again to remembrances of the deceased’s loving humanity), and then a voice begins to intone a version of the traditional burial sentences derived from the Book of Common Prayer: “And now we commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in the sure and certain hope . . .” (here the prayerbook continues, “. . . of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ . . .”) “. . . that her memory will be kept alive within us all.”

Films and television programs provide vivid models of the new self-centered ethic, involving self-fulfillment, self-gratification, and a self-obsessed preoccupation with the violent externalization of human feelings, frequently without regard for its consequences for others. Beyond that, the mass media project an ethical stance by reflecting and satisfying the public fascination with selfishness and violence. The O.J. Simpson affair is only the most recent example, but it is a particularly telling one.

If there is a secular religion, the evidence offered above suggests it is still embryonic, not yet fully identifiable as religious expression. Indeed, religion is frequently the last thing on the minds of those who engineer secular art and culture. There are enough clues, though, to begin to build a provisional list of tenets the new religion might ascribe to. The immediate temptation is to formulate these in negative ways: selfishness, cynicism, violence, moral decay. But then, it is also possible to express the tenets of traditional religions in unflattering ways as well: ignorance, narrow-mindedness, discrimination, naiveté. We come closer to the essence of the new religion by trying to articulate tenets in their positive forms, forms that give energy and vitality to human existence. Here are five tenets that might just possibly be front-runners.

1. The individual human being is what really matters in the scheme of things; the individual has the unlimited right to pursue “success”: self-satisfaction, self-fulfillment, and self-gratification. If there is any residual concept of “god,” it exists primarily for the purpose of comforting, consoling, encouraging, and inspiring the individual.
2. The worth of anything is to be calculated primarily on its usefulness to human beings, rather than on service to god(s) or on the intrinsic value of the thing itself.
3. Modern science has the potential to create for human beings an ever-improving quality of life (this tenet goes

hand in hand with a fascination for the technology that is the result of modern science).

4. New is better—this assumption helps fuel modern society’s seemingly insatiable appetite for novelty and its rejection of the traditional (it has given rise to the oxymoron “a new tradition”).

5. Feeling takes precedence over and is ultimately more dependable than thought or reason; the more intense the expression of feeling, the more valid and authentic it is. Robert Bellah writes, “Television is much more interested in how people feel than in what they think.”¹ One symptom of this assumption is the glorification (evident throughout the mass media) of the physical and sensual aspects of human life above the intellectual.

These five “tenets” are perhaps more accurately labeled as attitudes or assumptions. Probably most members of modern society (even those who do not adhere to a traditional religion) would not consciously affirm all of them; many would vehemently contest them. That does not, however, detract from the influence they exert upon modern thought processes. After all (as T.S. Eliot writes), “. . . it is only too easy for a people to maintain contradictory beliefs and to propitiate mutually antagonistic powers.”²

It would of course be possible to give a different label to what I have identified as “secular religion”—to call it an ideology, or a life-style. Its more devoted adherents would surely feel more comfortable with such an alternative label. Why is it helpful to recognize the new phenomenon as a religion? First, it has an identifiably indigenous and unified art and culture, as well as a nascent cult, myth, and ethic. Next, its adherents exhibit an unself-conscious, passionate conviction more characteristic of a religion than of an ideology or life-style. Third, the people who subscribe to it are appropriately numerous to be recognized as a society. The number of people who attend to the mass media supports this. In 1976, for example, two Temple University sociologists attempted to investigate students’ reactions to rock music. They easily found a group of rock enthusiasts to take part in their study, but “a significant sample [of students] could not be found who disliked hard rock music.”³

It would be especially helpful to those traditional religions that are in continuous contact with modern society (in particular Christianity and Judaism, but also to a lesser extent Islam and the Eastern religions) to recognize the existence of a secular religion, since above all it is they who are threatened by it. Traditional religions today are not operating on a level playing field. Tak-

ing secular religion seriously would at least acknowledge both the source and the gravity of the competition. It would compel traditional religions to address it with proper “respect,” and to clarify their own evangelization mandates. For the choice is never between believing and not believing, but rather between competing beliefs. And so modern society’s retreat from traditional religions must be understood not as neglect or forgetting, not as back-sliding, revolt, or apostasy—most emphatically not as a religious void—but as mass conversion to other faiths, among which the primary and most attractive is the secular religion described here.

Apply to traditional religions standards of measurement similar to those introduced above to detect the existence of secular religion, and the degree to which secular religion has eviscerated traditional religion becomes strikingly apparent. Museums are full of artifacts indigenous to traditional religions. The heritage of indigenously Christian art from earlier ages blankets the European landscape. Even the New England village green features at least one uniquely religious building. What is the art of traditional religion today? Is today’s ubiquitous utilitarian church architecture an expression of faith, or is it primarily determined by the same principles of economy, human comfort, sensationalism, and planned obsolescence that rule the architecture of secular culture? Does the visual or musical art practiced in religious buildings suggest that adherents value fine art as an intense expression of their faith? Is the literature created and promoted by organized religion recognized for its literary and artistic merit? In short, how easy is it to identify through its artistic expression the existence of a traditionally religious culture in modern society? How unique, how intense, how vital is it? Even more significantly, the art practiced today by traditional religions is almost 100% nonindigenous, that is, not generated by today’s traditional religion itself, but borrowed almost completely from the art of the surrounding secular culture, or from Christian (or Jewish) art of the past. Traditional religion is not dead, but it is artistically and culturally (and therefore actually) sterile, impotent.

In what ways are traditional religions still alive? Individual faith is by any measure alive and well in the modern world. Large numbers of people, at least in the U.S., affirm their belief in a god and their contact with that god through personal, private prayer. A traditionally religious ethic also not only survives but thrives, as figures such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta powerfully attest. Large por-

tions of the Judeo-Christian ethic, of course, coincide with enlightened self-interest, but beyond that, much of that ethic is still widely admired and adhered to because it continues to be perceived as providing a viable basis for a compassionate, truly human society.

Secular religion has therefore encountered stubborn opposition from individual faith, prayer, and ethics—they have resisted being engulfed by it. It has, however, mounted a frontal assault upon traditional religious cult and myth; this it has done by trying to make them appear silly or simple-minded, the deluded fantasies of the insecure, the aged, the intellectually secluded, the dim-witted. To realize how successful that attack has been, simply consider the trivialization these terms have undergone in the modern mind: “cult” today is equated with unquestioning allegiance and devotion to occult, deviant religious fanaticism, while myth is construed as a species of fairy tale or as a kind of naive self-deception. Christian cult and myth have encountered no insurmountable problems enculturating themselves in societies that are traditionally religious to begin with (e.g., in Africa). In such circumstances, the cult need only shift the allegiance of the indigenous peoples from one traditional religion to another, need only replace one set of traditional myths with another. It is in modern secular societies (especially in the traditionally Christian ones) that the Christian cult is the most confused and adrift, in Europe largely due to mass apostasy, and in the U.S. primarily because of mass distortions (pietism, individualism, fundamentalism, worship as entertainment).

Individual faith, prayer, and ethics are the more private aspects of religion; cult and myth, on the other hand, are its communal ones. Thus it is the corporate dimension of traditional religion that secular religion has undermined. Communal aspects of religion have traditionally provided the primary impetus for indigenous artistic expression; they also support, channel, and intensify individual faith, perpetuating it from one generation to the next. Secular religion has thrown all of this into disarray. And so, while traditional religions continue to have great power for individuals, it is as a communal phenomenon that traditional religion is moribund. This leaves traditional religion vulnerable to the distortions that individuals (or groups of individuals) can experience when they are not shaped and checked by a greater community that surrounds and molds them.

Religious groups have reacted in two different ways to the devastating assault on traditional cult and myth. The first of these is resistance through self-imposed isolation, popularly referred to as fun-

damentalism. Fundamentalism superficially resembles traditional religious orthodoxy; indeed, it normally vaunts its super-orthodoxy. It is, however, a very different animal. Fundamentalism (of all varieties) is traditional religious consciousness under siege: bereft of its most subtle intellects, myopic, anxiety-ridden, prone to in-fighting, geared to resistance. Siege is indeed the most apt analogy—the beleaguered community cannot avoid distortion, dissention, internal divisive friction; it cannot live an unfettered life, and it cannot take the offensive. The second reaction is accommodation, a tactic that has assumed many forms: rampant individualism, enthusiastic acceptance of secular art (popular music, entertainment evangelism) and secular myth (religious psychotherapy, the theology of self-acceptance); the sort of church-as-self-fulfillment-society as lampooned in Garry Trudeau’s *Doonesbury* comic series (see p. 42).

As secular religion assumes greater power and coherency, as its faults and stresses become more and more evident, the number of voices calling for a return to traditional religion mounts exponentially.⁴ As traditional religion moves ever deeper into its crisis of corporate self-identity, however, these calls go widely unheeded. The cracks and yawning fissures in its foundations are too obvious to be overlooked, and for many it is no longer vital or substantial enough to offer a viable alternative to the attractions, the positive features, of secular religion.

All of this suggests that we are witnessing in our time traditional religion(s) squaring off against secular religion. In this contest there are no bystanders, no spectators—humans *will* have “god(s),” and humans *will worship* them! It is far too early to say what in all of this is “good” or “bad.” Those whose allegiance is to the traditional will, of course, condemn the new religion, but they can hardly be considered impartial. Both the old and the new have produced effects widely considered good (e.g., a secure sense of community, of belonging versus a higher standard of living and enormous advances in healing the body), and both have proved themselves capable of developing fanatical and destructive elements (e.g., witch burning and ethnic cleansing versus widespread urban violence and human alienation).

Predictions of the future are notoriously fallible and essentially futile, but it appears that secular religion is likely to be the big winner (at least in the short run): indigenous peoples and traditional cultures are vanishing faster than the rain forests, and traditional religions are thrown into disarray when—and wherever they encounter the secular—they

remain a vital force in the lives of fewer and fewer people. Europe was still smoldering in the wake of World War I when William Butler Yeats wrote these lines:

Turning and turning in the widening
gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot
hold . . .

He was a prophet. There is for many people no longer any center. In place of the center, there are countless individual centers: the secular religion of the self. It remains for our children's children, and their children after them, to decide whether and how the new reli-

gion, the secular religion, is sufficient in the long run to energize and sustain a viable, truly human art and culture. In grappling with issues such as this, the touchstone remains the interrelation of religion, culture, and the arts. If you want to assess the presence of a religion, look for it in its art. If you want to know its nature and tenets, seek them in its art. If you want to know how intense it is, assess the vitality of its art.

TO BE CONTINUED

NOTES

1. Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, c.1985), p. 281.
2. T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber [1949]), p. 32.

3. Robert Pattison, *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 9.

4. Most recently: William J. Bennett, "What Really Ails America," *Readers Digest* (Pleasantville, N.Y.: The Readers Digest Association), April 1994; Charles Colson, "Can We Be Good Without God?," *USA Today* (New York: Society for the Advancement of Education), May 1994.

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Quentin Faulkner, AAGO, is Steinhart Professor of Music at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.